

AGE MATTERS

Everything you need to know about barrel-aged spirits

BY EMILY O'CONNOR

Every cocktail drinker has heard of barrel-aged whiskey.

It has been a staple of American spirits for generations. Whiskey is barrel-aged because it helps the spirit attain the desired flavor; it also gives whiskey its signature amber color.

More importantly, the depth of the process allows the distiller to target a specific flavor and texture. There are aging requirements for specific styles of whiskeys, requiring a minimum of two to four years for the most basic level, and longer for more feature labels.

One of my favorite examples of the true effect of barrel-aging is tasting Buffalo Trace next to its 10 year senior, Eagle Rare.

Sampling these two bourbons side by side speaks volumes of the rich flavor and smoothness achieved with the barrel-aging process.

Though barrel-aged whiskeys have always been common, in recent time the presence of specialty aged spirits is noticeably expansive. I am most excited about the increasing trend of barrel-aged gins.

Gin is a naturally dynamic spirit, typically known for being herbaceous; boasting juniper and cardamom in addition to multitudes of other botanicals and citrus, giving it a lovely but intense brightness.

When gin is aged in a whiskey barrel, however, it allows the spirit to gain some of the buttery warmth of the whiskey soaked oak, resulting in a rounded, floral and caramel character that can be enjoyed sipped on a large rock of ice like one would with a bourbon.

There are also many classic cocktails that incorporate barrel aged gin in a similar way as bourbon is used in a Manhattan, but a favorite that comes to mind is the Martinez.

Barrel-aging is nothing new in the world of craft beer, either. Breweries often collaborate with distilleries in order to trade barrels for crossover aging. Though this trend started with traditional whiskey barrel-aged stouts and IPAs, there is now an incorporation of gin barrels in the process.

It represents one of many ways to bridge the gap between cocktails and beer as there is plenty of similarity to the craft.



On a more modest scale, there are small models of oak barrels that, if prepared properly, can make a lovely addition to the home bar.

With home barrel-aging, it is important to do plenty of research about the preparation of the barrel so as not to lose too much of the spirit to absorption or leakage.

For my barrel, rather than age a batched cocktail, I decided to work with a single spirit, I thought of Fernet-Branca. Fernet is a digestive with a strong medicinal and herbal profile. In the same barrel, I thought of aging Green Chartreuse, a liqueur offering a similar palate as Fernet, but with a sweeter delivery.

The flavors carried over are rounded out by the warmth of the oak infusion, balancing their bitterness. Sip either on a rock of ice after a luxurious meal or mix it into a cocktail. It just takes a little creativity and a lot of patience to take your home bar to yet another level.

As always, please drink responsibly and never waste a drop! Cheers!

Emily O'Connor is the bar manager at the Bowline Hotel.



Photos by Nikki Davidson

ABOVE: Bowline Hotel bar manager Emily O'Connor prepares a barrel for use. **RIGHT:** When gin is aged in a barrel, it allows the spirit to gain some of the buttery warmth of the whiskey soaked oak.